Start Young Start Now!

Report of the Task Force on Children at Risk

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Part 1 - Overview .... Start Young - Start Now!

The tragic events in Taber in 1999 caused so many Albertans, young and old, to pause and ask, "How can this happen? And what can we do to make sure it doesn't happen again?"

The answers are not easy ones. In spite of the best efforts of families, communities, schools, teachers, caring professionals and governments at all levels, there are times when things go tragically wrong. When they do, it is an important reminder that we can't and should not take the future of our children for granted. Instead, we must search for answers, no matter how difficult and complex those answers might be.

In the months since Premier Ralph Klein established the Task Force on Children at Risk, we have done just that ... searched for answers and searched for solutions.

Our task is not to explain what happened in Taber, but to search for ways of working together to make sure Alberta's children are healthy, happy, safe and secure, and ready for whatever their futures might hold.

In the following pages of this report, you will find the results of our search.

We have learned a great deal. We learned about thousands of caring professionals, community members and volunteers spending countless hours with children and youth. We learned about youth who have so much potential, so many ideas and so much to offer. We learned about families working hard to provide the best for their children. And we learned about the literally thousands of programs currently in place to support families, children and youth. All of these strengths provide an excellent starting point for Alberta's children.

We also learned that while most of Alberta's children and youth are doing just fine, for some, their world is not a positive place. We must bluntly acknowledge that, while the vast majority of Alberta's children and youth are off to a wonderful start in their lives, some are not. Some are involved in drugs, prostitution, gangs, and criminal activity. For some, home is not a loving and secure place. For some, their families are unable to provide the basics of food, shelter and warm clothing.

Overall, two messages are clear in this report: **Start Young - Start Now!**

All the evidence and research we encountered says don't wait until there's a problem, **start young**. Start even before children are born. Remember that the early years of life are the most critical as young minds and bodies are still developing.

Start now. Many have said, "We're tired of talking about the issues. Let's get on with it!"

We agree. This report provides a catalyst for action at every level and in every community.

Many activities are now underway within the provincial government and in communities across the province. The Alberta Children's Initiative is a key example of government's commitment to children and our determination to work together across several Ministries to meet the needs of Alberta's children. The work of the Task Force has also become a rallying point for many people, organizations and government departments directly and indirectly involved in working with children, youth and their families. That work will continue.

Every year, Albertans can expect to see a follow-up report tracking progress in implementing the Task Force's recommendations and identifying new directions and new actions to take. Alberta's work in securing a healthy and safe future for our children doesn't end with this report ... it's only beginning.

Part 1 of the Task Force Report provides an overview of key points and highlights of the recommendations. Part 2 provides additional information and an explanation of the specific recommendations. Linkages to recommendations in the Children's Forum report are identified throughout the Task Force Report. A summary of information and ideas considered by the Task Force as well as the results of a survey of 5000 individuals and organizations across the province also are available. A protocol developed by the Taber Response Team as a model for other communities and schools is also included with the Task Force Report. For further information, check the website at www.gov.ab.ca/cs.

With support from government, community organizations and agencies, and individual Albertans, many of these actions can begin almost immediately. Others are long term strategies. We can start now, but it will take time for the impact of these actions to be seen in schools, in communities, in families and in the lives of individual children and youth.

The commitment is to start now ... with comprehensive plans and a commitment to follow through.

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The role of the Task Force is to take a look at issues facing children at risk including, but not limited to, those who are at risk of developing violent behaviour.

Twelve important points to remember

1. **The vast majority of Alberta's children and youth are doing just fine!** They have strong and supportive families. They're healthy. They're doing well in school. They pursue their interests, get involved, help others, and have ideas and plans for their futures. Alberta's young people deserve our respect and support.

2. **Some children and youth are struggling and they're not making good choices.** These young people need support, they need help, and they need strategies to help them change direction.

3. **Families and people raising children come first.** The home is the most important influence on a child's life, whether that home involves parents or other adults who are raising children. For many families, it involves aunts, uncles, grandparents and close family friends. At the same time, the home is not always the best place for children and youth. When that happens, it is critical that safe and secure alternatives are available including foster homes and other alternatives where children can get the love and support they need. We need to remember that one caring and competent adult in a child's life can make a tremendous difference.

4. **The earlier the better.** The best strategies for giving children a healthy and happy start in life start early, in some cases, even before they are conceived and born. Problems like Fetal Alcohol Syndrome and low birth weight can be prevented. We also know that what happens in the first few years can have a lifelong impact on health, mental ability and coping skills.

5. **Balance preventing problems with addressing them when they happen.** The best approach is to prevent problems by starting early and taking a long term approach. But that's not enough. We need to address children's problems when they happen and provide resources to help children before the problems become worse. A second chance can get a young life back on track, but it's more difficult and more expensive.

6. **It's not just about children and youth.** It's about treating people with respect and dignity. The way we treat children and youth is a reflection of the way we treat each other as adults. We can't expect children and youth to grow up with positive attitudes, strong values, and respect for others, unless we act that way ourselves.

7. **Enough is enough.** Although there are no quick fixes, people want to see action. And they want to see a firm stand taken when it comes to accepting things in our society that don't create a positive environment for our children - things like violence, pornography, prostitution, bullying and negative images of children and youth. It's time we said, "This is simply not acceptable."

> *"If Canada is to survive and thrive as a caring and prosperous society, our leaders - and the rest of us - must do more than pay lip service to the observation that children are the key to our future."*
>
> - Kathleen Guy, Our Promise to Children

8. **It's up to all of us.** Developing strong and healthy children and youth is up to families, it's up to communities, and it's up to governments at all levels. The key challenge is to find the best ways of working together to achieve the best results.

9. **We're not starting from scratch.** There are hundreds of excellent programs and initiatives already in place. Communities, organizations and government departments have established many excellent programs. The Alberta Children's Initiative channels government programs and actions for children. There are successful models here in Alberta and in other places that we can learn from. The objective isn't to reinvent the wheel, but to use the base of programs in place as an important starting point.

10. **We can't focus just on children at risk.** While steps should be taken to help identify children at risk and provide the support they need, we have to balance that with a broader approach that focuses on making sure all children get a healthy start in life. Programs targeted only at children at risk may leave out some children and their families who would benefit from overall strategies to promote healthy and happy children and youth.

11. **We need to assess what works and what doesn't.** In spite of best intentions, some programs produce good results and others don't. It's important to build research and evaluation into the agenda so we can track results, learn from each project and initiative, share the results, and use that information to make the best use of our resources.

12. **The issues are complex, and this report is just the beginning.** Through months of study, the Task Force learned the issues are complex, there are no easy answers, and work must continue over the longer term. Instead of saying, "The report is complete," in fact, this is just a beginning. Actions will continue over the long term as we continue the search for new ideas and better solutions.

These twelve important points reflect much of what the Task Force heard and learned through the process of reviewing research, studies, best practices, and current programs and services, combined with the advice of people involved in working with children and youth, professionals, and parents and youth themselves. The twelve points set an important context for the Task Force's recommendations.

What do we know about
Alberta's children and youth?

Most children and youth are doing just fine.

✔ Compared with other provinces, Alberta has the second highest proportion of people who have completed high school.

✔ Surveys show about 65% of grade 12 students plan to go on to post-secondary education.

✔ 44% of high school students do volunteer work in their communities.

✔ The large majority of children and youth are neither violent nor at risk of developing violent behaviour.

✔ Most new babies are born healthy.

But some children and youth are not.

✔ Alberta's rates of youth involved in criminal offences, including violent offences, have declined, but continue to be higher than the Canadian average.

✔ 134 young people under 17 were apprehended between February 1 and November 30, 1999 under new legislation for the protection of children involved in prostitution.

✔ The teen suicide rate has increased dramatically over the past 30 years. The suicide rate for Aboriginal youth is five times higher. Across Canada, suicide was the cause of one third of all deaths for registered Indian youth.

✔ Aboriginal children are more likely to live in care than children in the general population.

✔ The incidence of gangs and gang-related behaviours appears to be increasing.

✔ In 1997-98, 5,212 women and 6,232 children used Women's Shelters. There were 46,026 reports of child abuse and 13,693 of those cases were substantiated.

There are risks to consider.

✔ Children in low income families have more risk factors in their lives. However, most of Canada's troubled children come from middle income families.

✔ Estimates are that 7% of children aged 9 - 13 have a mental disorder.

✔ While youth drug and alcohol use has been declining in Alberta, information shows that these trends are beginning to reverse. 35% of youths surveyed in Alberta say that smoking is the major school health problem.

- ✔ Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (FAS) is one of the leading causes of preventable birth defects and developmental delays in children. Estimates are that 1,200 children in the care of Child Welfare suffer from FAS and FAE (Fetal Alcohol Effect).

- ✔ Different surveys of youth show that 53% said they never or only sometimes felt safe at school and over 50% said they considered bullying to be a "big" or "very big" problem.

- ✔ In the past 20 years, the number of young children affected by marital breakup has tripled. 42% of all Aboriginal families are headed by a single parent and 90% of those single parents are women.

- ✔ Start with deliberate action.

- ✔ Members of the Task Force have clearly heard the message that action is needed and needed now.

"Talking without action being taken is useless."

- Survey respondent

The Task Force recommends deliberate steps in the following five priority areas:

- Parenting comes first
- Developing healthy kids
- Taking action in communities
- Getting our act together
- Promoting research and measuring results

Parenting comes first

1. **Start with early intervention.**

    1.1. Expand regular follow-up by public health nurses with families of newborn children from birth to 18 months.

2. **Expand parenting education and access to information.**

    2.1. Expand parenting education and start before the child is born.

    2.2. Implement a website for families along with other innovative approaches to provide parents better access to information about good parenting.

3. **Provide support to families when a crisis occurs.**

    3.1. Consider the feasibility of implementing a province-wide 211 emergency line for families in crisis.

4. **Ensure that children and youth have access to secure and supportive foster care when they need it.**

    4.1. Expand foster care programs and provide the support foster parents need.

Developing healthy kids

5. **Make sure schools are ready when a crisis occurs.**

    5.1. Require every school to have a comprehensive crisis response plan in place.

    5.2. Train teachers to identify students who may be at risk and to refer those students to appropriate professionals.

6. **Expand mental health services for children and youth.**

    6.1.   Increase access to a range of mental health programs in the community.

    6.2.   Ensure quick access to services for at-risk suicidal youth.

    6.3.   Expand access to programs for young people with eating disorders.

7. **Make sure children and youth get the services they need, when they need them.**

    7.1.   Streamline access to services.

    7.2.   Expand students' access to multidisciplinary support and counseling in schools.

    7.3.   Set provincial standards for counselors working with children and youth.

    7.4.   Expand mentorship and peer counseling programs for children and youth.

    7.5.   Identify the risk factors involved and use appropriate intervention before students are expelled from school.

    7.6.   Ensure that alternative programs are available for youth who are expelled or suspended from school.

    7.7.   Develop protocols involving school boards, local children's authorities and family and social service agencies to ensure that appropriate follow-up programs and services are available for youth who are expelled from school or drop out.

8. **Start early to prevent problems and improve children's chances of success at school.**

    8.1.   Expand programs and initiatives for young children before they start school, including community programs, head start, and school readiness programs.

    8.2.   Review current practices and policies and provide necessary support for at risk children in school including those with special needs, disabilities, and behaviour problems.

    8.3.   Assess the impact of current pilot projects on reducing class size.

9. **Take steps to prevent and protect children and youth from abuse, violence, bullying and gang activities.**

    9.1.   Coordinate and expand successful strategies for reducing bullying, violence and gang-related activities in schools and communities.

    9.2.   Encourage federal legislation to increase penalties for persons caught selling drugs within 500 metres of a school.

9.3. Develop and implement a Kids Crime Stoppers program for children and youth to use in reporting crimes in the school and community.

9.4. Vigorously support and defend legislation related to child prostitution, child pornography and child abuse.

10. Take steps to celebrate Alberta's children, youth and families, stress the importance of positive parenting, and reduce depictions of violence in the media.

10.1. Develop and launch a province-wide campaign celebrating Alberta's children and youth and encouraging positive parenting and community action for children at risk.

10.2. Work with the media, the CRTC, parent groups, Alberta Community Development, and other agencies to encourage a better balance of programs and reduce the depictions of violence and negative images of young people in the media.

Taking action in communities

11. Encourage communities to have coordinated plans in place for addressing the needs of children and youth.

11.1. Involve communities, children's authorities, health authorities, municipalities, police, and other community organizations in developing and implementing a "community care plan" for children and youth. Consideration should also be given to establishing community-based centres for children and youth.

11.2. Encourage communities to develop a youth advisory panel involving all the agencies working with young people and the youth themselves.

11.3. Encourage the use of case conferencing and other alternatives to the formal justice system.

11.4. Encourage the development of Family and Community Support Services programs across the province.

11.5. Encourage partnerships with private sector organizations to provide families with access to computer equipment.

12. Address the housing needs of families and youth.

12.1 Partner with municipalities, the private sector and other agencies to assure the availability of low cost housing for those in need.

12.2 Partner with municipalities and other agencies to address the need for emergency facilities for temporarily homeless families and individuals across the province.

12.3　Work with housing authorities and municipalities to expand transitional housing for youth leaving emergency shelters and for families leaving women's shelters.

13. Remove barriers to access for services for First Nations children, families and communities, both on and off reserves.

13.1.　Recognize the important relationship between the province of Alberta and First Nations and improve the working relationship between First Nations agencies and provincial service providers.

13.2.　Improve communications between provincial service providers and First Nations, Metis, and other Aboriginal organizations to improve services for Aboriginal children, youth, families and communities.

13.3.　Work with the federal government and First Nations to identify and address gaps and overlaps in services and funding for children living on First Nations' reserves and to account for children and families relocating between reserves and into Alberta communities.

13.4.　Take steps to decrease the number of Aboriginal youth dropping out of school and increase the number graduating from high school.

14. Focus on education, training and increasing the supply of qualified people to work with children and youth.

14.1.　Work with post-secondary institutions to ensure there is an adequate supply of qualified people trained to work with children and youth.

14.2.　Provide appropriate training and support for volunteers who work with children and families.

Getting our act together

15. Reduce overlap and duplication, improve coordination, and streamline access to programs.

15.1　Complete a review of all agencies providing services to children and youth and receiving government funding.

15.2.　Provide coordinated access to information and funding for programs for children and youth at risk.

15.3　Continue to improve the business planning and budgeting process in government to remove barriers and encourage government departments to work together.

16. Provide more stable and secure funding for community programs.

16.1.　Consider providing longer term rather than year to year funding for programs and initiatives that demonstrate success.

Promoting research and measuring results

17. Assess the impact of the Task Force's recommendations.

17.1.   Identify measures for each of the recommendations included in the Task Force Report and report regularly on the results.

17.2.   Initiate research studies on the aftermath of the Taber incident, the impact on the community and the province, and the effectiveness of actions taken to respond.

18. Expand Alberta research on effective programs and approaches.

18.1.   Work with community agencies and universities to conduct research on Alberta-based programs and approaches.

18.2.   Develop and disseminate Canadian and Alberta information on successful projects and approaches for children at risk.

18.3.   Expand the emphasis on qualitative research about issues affecting children and youth and use that information to guide decisions, policies and actions.

What do these recommendations mean for Alberta's children and youth?

For prenatal to children 18 months, it means ...

- Better access to education and information for parents, starting even before a child is conceived. With this information, there is a better chance children will be born healthy and get a healthy start in life.

- Regular visits by trained public health nurses so children at risk can be identified early and appropriate supports are put in place.

For young children before they go to school, it means ...

- More programs to help young children and improve their chances of success.

- Expanded school readiness programs to help address and prevent problems for children at risk.

For children making the transition to adolescence, it means ...

- Better support for at risk children at school including those with special needs, disabilities, and behaviour problems.

- Better access to counseling, multidisciplinary teams and mental health programs.

For youth making the transition to adulthood, it means ...

- Better access to multidisciplinary support and counseling in schools

- Better access to mental health services, services for suicidal youth, and programs for young people with eating disorders

- Confidence that their school is well prepared if a crisis occurs

- More mentoring and peer counseling programs

- Alternative programs if they are at risk or have been suspended or expelled from school

- More active involvement in community programs and services designed to meet their needs

For all children and youth, it means ...

- Better information about parenting skills and programs available to their parents, starting when they are very young.

- Access to a province-wide crisis line if they or their families are in crisis

- Secure and supportive foster care for children and youth who cannot remain in their homes

- Greater protection from abuse, violence, bullying and gang activities

- More coordination of programs in their community

- Access to emergency and transitional housing for families and youth who need it

- Expanded mental health programs and services in communities across the province

For Aboriginal children and youth it means ..

- Better access to programs and services to meet their needs on reserves and in communities across the province

We're all responsible

The recommendations included in this report are far reaching and extend well beyond the responsibilities of the provincial government. The recommendations recognize that, first and foremost, parents have responsibility for their children and for ensuring they have a healthy, safe and positive start in their lives. But beyond the role of parents, we all have an important role to play. Taking action on the recommendations - and ensuring action for Alberta's children and youth - will require the combined efforts and energy of community agencies, children's authorities, health authorities, schools and school boards, police, social workers, counselors and other professionals, government departments and agencies.

An important next step within government will be to clearly identify responsibility for following up on recommendations, putting action plans in place, setting targets and assessing progress. This also must include establishing priorities and assessing the financial implications of the Task Force recommendations.

A wide range of government departments and agencies will need to work together with community groups, organizations, health and children's authorities, and others to ensure that there is a concerted plan in place.

A commitment to follow through

This report and recommendations provide a starting point. It responds to what we heard and learned through several months of work. But unlike the work of other committees and Task Forces, we are unable to say, "Our job is done." In fact, the job of protecting Alberta's children at risk and making sure they live healthy and happy lives is never done.

The issues are complex and they will take time, energy and deliberate action to address.

Our commitment is to follow through. To take this report as a starting point and ensure that every year government reports to Albertans on what was done as a result of the recommendations, what progress has been made, and what new ideas are being considered. This annual check up will ensure that the needs of families, children and youth at risk continue to be front and centre on our government's agenda and in the minds and hearts of Albertans.

Start Young ... Start Now is more than a message of what needs to be done. It's a commitment to Alberta's children and youth. A commitment that begins now.

Part 2 - Recommendations for action

Part 1 of the Task Force report provided an overview of what the Task Force learned and its recommendations. Part 2 provides a more detailed explanation of the Task Force recommendations.

In preparing its recommendations, the Task Force reviewed research, considered the programs and services currently available in the province, looked at successful approaches from other provinces and in the United States, and talked with hundreds of people who are involved in providing programs, to parents, and most important, to young people themselves.

A summary of the input and advice reviewed by the Committee is available along with the results of a survey of 5000 individuals and organizations across the province. The survey results pointed to the importance of:

- ✔ Making things happen
- ✔ Starting early, with early intervention and programs for parents and young children
- ✔ Providing supports for families and expanding parenting skills
- ✔ Building on what works and what's successful
- ✔ Providing support for children and young people in school
- ✔ Expanding access to counseling services
- ✔ Addressing gaps in services for youth
- ✔ Working together
- ✔ Providing adequate, long term funding
- ✔ Recognizing the limitations of what volunteers can do
- ✔ Reducing the burden of poverty.

Members of the Task Force have clearly heard the message that action is needed and needed now.

The recommendations of the Task Force are a blend of actions that can and should be taken in the short term and strategies that can start now but will have longer term impact. We also have identified a number of ideas that were brought to our attention and should be given further consideration as we continue to explore ways of addressing the needs of children at risk.

The recommendations are broken down into five categories:

- Parenting comes first
- Developing healthy kids
- Taking action in communities
- Getting our act together
- Promoting research and measuring results

Parenting comes first

It's a simple message - parenting comes first. Parents, and other adults who may be responsible for parenting, have the most important impact on children. In many families, "parenting" includes an important role for aunts and uncles, grandparents and family friends.

While most parents and families provide supportive and loving homes for their children, there are some cases where people lack positive parenting skills. And the impact on the child, especially in the first few years of life, can be devastating. We know, for example, that certain kinds of parenting are more likely to result in aggressive behaviour in children. Family violence puts children at serious risk, it affects their development and their futures, and it can create an impression in children that violence is an acceptable way of dealing with anger or solving problems. Parents of children and youth with developmental difficulties face particular challenges and additional stress in their families and their homes.

Some might say good parenting is just good common sense, but the reality is that some parents struggle with parenting and may not have the skills to raise healthy and happy children. Babies don't come with an "instruction manual" and some parents did not have the positive family life and experiences that would have helped them in raising their own children. We don't all necessarily know how to be good parents. At different points in a family's life, parents may need help to get them through difficult times. It's critical for support to be available to families where and when they need it.

Recommendations

1.   Start with early intervention.

1.1.   Expand regular follow-up by public health nurses with families of newborn children from birth to 18 months.

Early intervention is the best way of identifying children at risk and providing help and support before problems arise or become more difficult to deal with. Public health nurses can play an important role in early intervention. In most cases, a public health nurse follows up with newborn children and their families in the days immediately following the child's birth. This should be expanded to provide longer term support and regular visits for up to 18 months. This approach would also help identify children and families at risk and link them to appropriate programs and support in the community.

The importance of early intervention and nurturing healthy beginnings was a key theme of the Children's Forum Report. Several recommendations from the Children's Forum support the expansion of early intervention programs, particularly those targeted for parents.

2.   Expand parenting education and access to information.

2.1.   Expand parenting education and start before the child is born.

Research shows that the early years are critical for young children, and those early years start even before a child is born. Prospective parents need to understand the importance of good prenatal nutrition and positive parenting choices and skills before the child is born.

Better information should also be available to help and support all parents with the important job of raising their children, especially information on developmental stages, expectations at different ages, effective communication, and strategies for dealing with different problems and issues. The materials should reflect different languages, cultures, expectations and values and should address both prenatal and postnatal care for children. Specific actions should focus on reducing smoking and alcohol abuse in expectant mothers and promoting healthy lifestyles, nutrition, and healthy relationships. In addition, certain groups are more likely to have difficulty with parenting skills. Education programs should be developed and targeted to specific groups such as young people and teenage parents.

2.2. Implement a website for families along with other innovative approaches to provide parents better access to information about good parenting.

Many parents are looking for good information about positive parenting, good nutrition for their children, and ways of handling certain behaviour problems. A website, geared for parents and designed for parents, with a broad base of information, chat lines, and ways of getting answers to their questions, would provide one more tool for families. It also would provide a source of information about the various programs and services available across the province. While every parent does not have access to the Internet, we know that more and more people are "surfing the net" either in their own homes or in libraries. This trend is expected to increase. For those who do not have access to computers or the Internet, Child and Family Service Authorities, regional health authorities, and a wide range of community organizations should work together to develop the most effective ways of providing easily accessible information to parents in their communities.

3. Provide support to families when a crisis occurs.

3.1. Consider the feasibility of implementing a province-wide 211 emergency line for families in crisis.

When families are in crisis or a child is in trouble, families and children often don't know where to turn. They need immediate access to help and support and an informed person to give them good information and advice. An emergency hot line implemented across the province would provide this essential support to families and provide a direct link to services available in the community. Steps should be taken to explore the feasibility and costs of establishing this type of crisis line. This should include working closely with various groups and organizations that already have established crisis lines in some communities and considering partnerships to expand these services across the province.

4. Ensure that children and youth have access to secure and supportive foster care when they need it.

4.1. Expand foster care programs and provide the support foster parents need.

While the home is the most important place for a child, that home may not necessarily be with their family, especially in cases of violence, neglect or abuse. Safe and caring foster families are critical for children and youth when their own homes are not the best place for them to be. Programs need to be in place to support foster parents and encourage more parents to open their homes to foster children. This is particularly important for Aboriginal children and youth.

Other ideas to explore

- Provide parenting education courses for young people in junior and senior high school

- Explore further changes to the tax system to support parents

- Encourage health authorities to expand programs like "buddy moms", "Success by six", collective kitchens, and other programs targeted at supporting families and new mothers.

Developing healthy kids

We've learned that the vast majority of Alberta's children and youth are doing just fine - but some are not. We've also learned that effective programs start early when children are very young, they focus on building strengths in children so they can withstand some of the risks they may face and are better able to cope with difficult situations. The best strategies focus on improving children's chances of success and school. And they focus on building hope for the future and a positive outlook on life.

The Task Force suggests that the best approach is a two-pronged one - to address specific problems of children and youth who are having difficulties and also to address the broader objective of promoting positive growth and development for all children and youth.

In many of these activities, it is vitally important that young people and children be directly involved in identifying the best strategies and programs that work for them.

Recommendations

5. Make sure schools are ready when a crisis occurs.

5.1. Require every school to have a comprehensive crisis response plan in place.

In the aftermath of the Taber crisis, we have learned that schools often are not well prepared to deal with situations where young people pose a threat to themselves and others in the school. Too often, school administrators do not have the experience or the professional support from others in the community, they are concerned about repercussions with media, parents and other students, and they try to contain the problem or deal with the situation themselves. While teachers do an excellent job of listening to students and providing help and support, they are not trained to identify risk factors or handle situations where young people are in crisis.

Key components of the crisis response plan should include:

- Immediate access to crisis teams of trained people from outside the school who are available to go into schools and provide support to address early signs of trouble

- Orientation and training for school administrators giving them practical tools for dealing with problems when they arise, working with other community agencies, and opening the school to additional support from professionals trained in working with children at risk.

The Children's Forum Report includes a similar recommendation that all schools have plans in place to respond to a crisis and deal with post-crisis intervention.

A template for a crisis response plan was developed by the Taber Response Project and is included with the Task Force report as a starting point for schools to consider.

5.2. Train teachers to identify students who may be at risk and to refer those students to appropriate professionals.

Because of their ongoing contact with students, teachers can play an important role in identifying children and youth who may be at risk. But they need training to assist them in identifying factors to watch for in their students. They also need to understand the importance of referring these students to appropriate professionals rather than trying to address the problems themselves.

6. Expand mental health services for children and youth.

6.1. Increase access to a range of mental health programs in the community.

6.2. Ensure quick access to services for at-risk suicidal youth.

6.3. Expand access to programs for young people with eating disorders.

A Children's Mental Health initiative is underway across government. However, this work is just beginning. The Task Force repeatedly heard concerns about children's mental health problems, high suicide rates, and the lack of effective community mental health programs for children and youth. This concern was echoed in the Children's Forum Report. The need for expanded community programs is a particular concern in smaller communities. There also is a serious shortage of trained professionals who are able to provide mental health programs and services to children and youth. These issues need to be addressed as an important priority for government.

Particular problems were noted in accessing intervention programs for young people who may be suicidal or who may be seriously compromising their health because of eating disorders. Alberta's youth suicide rates are growing significantly and there aren't enough programs available across the province. Eating disorders are a growing concern. Currently, there are only limited treatment programs available for young people. A comprehensive approach is needed ranging from promotion of good health and healthy images for young people, prevention, early identification of young people at risk, to basic services and specialized care for those at risk.

7. **Make sure children and youth get the services they need, when they need them.**

7.1. Streamline access to services.

When children, youth and families need support, it should be readily available and easy to access. Ideas for streamlining services could include providing each child or youth with access to a contact person to provide guidance and help them access the services they need. This contact person should have access to a wide range of services provided by different agencies and a team of qualified professionals. The proposed 211 line would also link children and youth immediately to well informed people who can provide advice and direct them to appropriate services in the community.

7.2. Expand students' access to multidisciplinary support and counseling in schools.

The Task Force consistently heard of problems related to the shortage of counselors in schools. Children and youth with immediate problems often have to wait many days or weeks before a counselor is available. In some cases, teachers are the only ones available for counseling. This puts added pressure on teachers who are already busy and may not be fully trained to provide appropriate counseling. We need more counselors in schools to work with students who need help. Counselors should work with teachers and school staff in helping students with social and emotional problems to ensure that appropriate help is provided as quickly as possible. Schools counselors also report that they spend an inordinate amount of time filling out forms for "coding" and funding purposes and developing individual education plans for students. This limits the amount of time they can spend directly with children and youth. The review of special needs funding recently announced by the Minister of Learning should help address this concern.

Children and young people also need access to other professionals such as public health nurses, people trained in working with children with disabilities, social workers, or family counselors. These types of multidisciplinary teams should be available to schools on a regular basis.

7.3. Set provincial standards for counselors working with children and youth.

While professional standards are in place for social workers, psychologists and psychiatrists, there are no consistent, province-wide standards for counselors. The result is a wide variation in background, skills and experience in dealing with children and youth.

7.4. Expand mentorship and peer counseling programs for children and youth.

Access to trained counselors and professionals is important. But other informal types of support for young people are also important. For many children and youth, a positive relationship with a caring adult can make a significant difference in their lives. Current programs like Big Brothers and Big Sisters, Junior Achievement, and other mentorship programs should be available to more young people across the province. People should be encourage to get involved with youth and act as mentors and role models. Alberta's post-secondary institutions should consider providing formal recognition for mentoring and leadership experience. Mentorship from peers and other youth is also an important way of providing support to young people at risk.

Another suggestion is to expand students' access to career web sites showcasing Alberta's employers, linking them to the tremendous opportunities available in Alberta, and showing them the kinds of skills and attitudes they will need to develop. Examples such as Youth Connections should be supported.

7.5. Identify the risk factors involved and use appropriate intervention before students are expelled from school.

7.6. Ensure that alternative programs are available for youth who are expelled or suspended from school.

7.7. Develop protocols involving school boards, local children's authorities and family and social service agencies to ensure that appropriate follow-up programs and services are available for youth who are expelled from school or drop out.

Teachers and school administrators often can identify students who are frequently in trouble at school and likely to end up being suspended or expelled. Appropriate intervention programs should be available for these young people before they are suspended or expelled. For those who are suspended or expelled, current legislation requires school authorities to continue providing them with an education program. However, the concern is that young people who cause problems at school continue to cause problems in the community and often do not have access to appropriate follow-up programs. While some school authorities have developed storefront schools and other innovative approaches, in many

cases, only distance learning programs are available. The Task Force feels that better approaches are needed to give these young people a chance to get back on track and resume their studies.

The Task Force also heard concerns that young people who are expelled from school may end up dropping out entirely and are often at risk of further trouble. Protocols should be in place to make sure these young people don't fall through the cracks but instead, get appropriate programs and services from community agencies.

8. **Start early to prevent problems and improve children's chances of success at school.**

8.1. Expand programs and initiatives for young children before they start school, including community programs, head start, and school readiness programs.

Too often, children at risk are identified only when they enter school and by that time, opportunities to make a positive difference for the child have been lost. Active steps should be taken to expand programs for parents and children in their early years, to improve the chances of children at risk being identified early, to improve their early literacy skills, and to respond to problems early in a child's life. Kindergarten also is an important time for many young children. It marks a transition from children spending most of their time with families or in child care centres to the first few years of school. School readiness and head start programs provide an opportunity to identify behaviour problems and other risks to a child's development and future success at school. Parent organizations, Children and Family Service Authorities, regional health authorities, schools and school boards, and other community agencies should work together to expand programs for children before they enter school including a range of options such as head start and school readiness programs.

8.2. Review current practices and policies and provide necessary support for at risk children in school including those with special needs, disabilities, and behaviour problems.

Support for children with special needs is available through school authorities. However, identifying those students eligible for special funding can be time consuming and leads to children being "labelled." Also growing numbers of children with mild, moderate and severe special needs have been identified. The Student Health Initiative has provided additional funding to partnerships all over the province to help ensure that students with special health needs can access educational programs. However, in future funding decisions, more needs to be done to ensure that children who are at risk or who have special needs, disabilities or

emotional/behavioural problems receive the support services they need. As noted earlier in the this report, the recently announced provincial review of special needs funding should help address many of these concerns.

8.3.   Assess the impact of current pilot projects on reducing class size.

The Task Force heard repeatedly about the importance of reducing class sizes in school, especially for children in younger grades. Pilot projects currently are underway and it is important to assess the outcomes of those pilot projects prior to making any further recommendations. This assessment should take into account not only the size of the class but other factors in the classroom such as the mix of students, their age, and particular learning needs. However, if the results are positive, the Task Force encourages the Minister of Learning to consider working with school boards to expand efforts to reduce class sizes in schools across the province, particularly for students in younger grades.

9.   **Take steps to prevent and protect children and youth from abuse, violence, bullying and gang activities.**

9.1.   Coordinate and expand successful strategies for reducing bullying, violence and gang-related activities in schools and communities.

Considerable work has been done in schools on initiatives such as "Safe and Caring Schools." However, bullying, violence and gang activities extend well beyond the school grounds. We need to acknowledge the seriousness of these issues and take immediate action. In some cases, schools and communities have worked together to implement successful strategies for addressing bullying and violence in schools. "Safe community" initiatives are in place in some communities across the province. Police and community agencies, especially in the major cities, are taking steps to reduce gang activities. Strong linkages are required among social workers, schools, probation and parole officers, police, and community agencies. Information should be shared among communities, agencies and schools, and additional steps should be taken to expand successful strategies across the province.

9.2.   Encourage federal legislation to increase penalties for persons caught selling drugs within 500 metres of a school.

While drug-related legislation and penalties are the responsibility of the federal government, the Task Force encourages the federal government to change its existing legislation to increase penalties for people caught selling drugs close to schools. This sends a clear message that Alberta's schools should be free from drugs and drug peddling.

9.3.   Develop and implement a Kids Crime Stoppers Program for children and youth to use in reporting crimes in the school and community.

Often, children and youth are the victims of crime, but they are too intimidated or afraid to report the crimes to police. A Crime Stoppers program, similar to the program in place in many communities, would give children and youth the protection and security they need to report crimes anonymously without fear of reprisals.

9.4.   Vigorously support and defend legislation related to child prostitution, child pornography and child abuse.

Alberta has been a leader in introducing innovative child prostitution legislation which takes as a starting point the fact that children involved in prostitution are victims of abuse. The province has also encouraged the federal government to take a strong position in defending legislation against child pornography. Challenges to both of these pieces of legislation are currently before the courts. It's time Albertans took a stand and said, "Our children will not be victimized or sexually abused. Childhood prostitution, child pornography and child abuse are simply not acceptable."

10.   **Take steps to celebrate Alberta's children, youth and families, stress the importance of positive parenting, and reduce depictions of violence in the media.**

10.1.   Develop and launch a province-wide campaign celebrating Alberta's children and youth and encouraging positive parenting and community action for children at risk.

Too often, the public sees negative images of Alberta's young people and families. We need to value our children and young people and celebrate their energy and achievements. This initiative could build on programs already in place within AADAC, with Family Day, Children's Week, and the "Great Kids" recognition program. Combined with the positive focus on children and youth, a province-wide campaign should reinforce the importance of parents and parenting and encourage communities to play a stronger role in supporting children at risk. The Children's Forum also included several recommendations related to public awareness and education campaigns to meet a variety of different objectives related to children and families.

10.2.   Work with the media, the CRTC, parent groups, Alberta Community Development, and other agencies to encourage a better balance of programs and reduce the depictions of violence and negative images of young people in the media.

Today's children and youth are bombarded with constant images of violence and negative images through a variety of media including television, movies, computer and video games, music, and other forms of entertainment. While it seems to be very difficult to influence or change what happens in the media, it is important to remember that, as individuals, we are responsible. We are the consumers of different forms of media and people need to take greater responsibility for making decisions about what they are prepared to accept, purchase or condone, both for themselves and for their children.

Direct efforts are needed - not necessarily to censor material - but to substitute positive models and positive actions for the current violent images that seem to predominate and can influence young people's thinking and behaviour. Ideas such as filters for the Internet, parent education programs, and appropriate screening should also be considered.

Advertising and public awareness programs to counteract the effect of negative images on some of our children should also be encouraged. Programs or advertising campaigns encouraging parents to discuss violent images their children have seen in the media and their consequences on real people would help provide a better balance. Parents should be encouraged to talk to their children more about what they are watching, reading, playing, or accessing on the Internet, and let them know about methods of resolving conflicts or being assertive that do not involve violence.

Other ideas to explore

- Build on current actions by AADAC and the Alberta Tobacco Reduction Alliance to reduce smoking and the use of alcohol and drugs by young people

- Consider the impact of the use of over-the-counter drugs and current practices of prescribing a variety of medications for young children with challenging behaviours and explore alternative approaches

- Assess the impact of school uniforms on reducing bullying and promoting positive attitudes in school. Involve young people directly in those discussions.

- Work directly with young people to identify gaps in programs and services, what works and what doesn't

- Continue to explore the most effective ways of improving safety at school

- Develop programs that provide children and their parents with media literacy skills

Taking action in communities

Communities can and do make a difference. Across the province, different organizations, agencies, individuals and community leaders have taken action to develop strong communities, safe neighbourhoods, and many opportunities for young people to participate in sports, recreation, arts, culture and community organizations.

A key challenge in communities is to get the various partners working together. Schools are a key focus for many activities involving children and youth, but schools can't do it alone. They need close links with services and programs in the community. Considerable work has been done in communities to establish and implement new Child and Family Service Authorities. Collaborative work involving schools, community agencies, police, and a wide variety of professionals takes time and effort, but it is the best way of coordinating efforts and making sure a child's needs are met.

Recommendations

11.   **Encourage communities to have coordinated plans in place for addressing the needs of children and youth.**

11.1.   Involve communities, children's authorities, health authorities, police, municipalities and other community organizations in developing and implementing a "community care plan" for children and youth. Consideration should also be given to establishing community-based centres for children and youth.

Communities across the province have many programs and services in place, but often there is a fragmented approach. Families, children and youth who need services don't always know where to go and what's available. And there are times when community agencies may not be aware of services provided by other agencies in the community. The result can be duplication of effort, time and resources. A "community care plan" would help coordinate services, identify priorities, and assess where there are gaps in services provided. These plans should be developed by a wide range of community agencies, including Aboriginal and Metis representatives.

Communities should also consider the need for community-based centres as a focal point for activities, programs and services related to children and youth. The importance of a safe and caring place for children and youth was also highlighted in the recommendations of the Children's Forum.

11.2. Encourage communities to develop a youth advisory panel involving all the agencies working with young people and the youth themselves.

Young people have many valuable ideas to offer and they want to be actively involved in deciding what needs to be done, not just having adults decide for them. In each community, there are opportunities for young people, agencies and professionals to work together to develop strong coalitions and make sure that programs and supports meet young people's needs. Alberta's Youth Secretariat should provide advice and information for these community youth panels.

The Children's Forum Report included several similar recommendations outlining support for youth action committees or community youth councils.

11.3. Encourage the use of case conferencing and other alternatives to the formal justice system.

For young people who are in trouble with the law in their community, case conferencing and other alternative approaches can provide an effective way of making youth accountable for their actions in a meaningful way. It requires extensive community involvement from many levels including the police, the family, the victims, professionals, and other involved people.

The importance of alternative approaches to youth incarceration such as Healing and Sentencing Circles, alternative measures and community mediation was also highlighted in the Children's Forum Report.

11.4. Encourage the development of Family and Community Support Services programs across the province.

Many communities provide support for a wide range of programs for children and youth through Family and Community Support Services. These programs should continue to be supported and expanded across the province.

11.5. Encourage partnerships with private sector organizations to provide families with access to computer equipment.

Computers and the Internet are quickly transforming many aspects of people's lives, their work, their entertainment and how they live. Increasingly, children and young people need access to a computer to develop skills and access information. Private sector organizations should be encouraged to donate refurbished computers and access to the Internet to families who otherwise would not be able to afford the equipment themselves. This would supplement, not replace, programs to encourage donations of equipment to schools.

12. Address the housing needs of families and youth.

12.1. Partner with municipalities, the private sector and other agencies to expand the availability of low cost housing for those in need.

12.2. Partner with municipalities and other agencies to address the need for emergency facilities for temporarily homeless families and individuals across the province.

12.3. Work with housing authorities and municipalities to expand transitional housing for youth leaving emergency shelters and for families leaving women's shelters.

With a growing population, particularly in the major urban centres, there is a growing problem with availability of affordable housing. Recommendations in the Children's Forum Report also point to the need for affordable housing for low-income families. This is an issue that must be addressed in collaboration with municipalities and as part of their community planning processes. In particular, there are no emergency shelter spaces for homeless families across the province. Short-term stays are provided in motels, but this is not the best option for families and children. Families experiencing violence or abuse in the home currently have access to shelters or other forms of "safe" housing. However, there is a shortage of transition housing that allows these families to move out of a shelter and into a short term housing arrangement until more permanent decisions are made. There also are housing problems for youth who, for whatever reason, are not able to remain with their families. Emergency shelter spaces are available, but no transitional housing. This often results in young people having to return to the street when they leave emergency shelters.

13. Remove barriers to access for services for First Nations children, families and communities, both on and off reserves.

13.1. Recognize the important relationship between the province of Alberta and First Nations and improve the working relationship between First Nations agencies and provincial service providers.

13.2. Improve communications between provincial service providers and First Nations, Metis, other Aboriginal organizations to improve services for Aboriginal children, youth, families and communities.

13.3. Work with the federal government and First Nations to identify and address gaps and overlaps in services and funding for children living on First Nations' reserves and to account for children and families relocating between reserves and into Alberta communities.

13.4. Take steps to decrease the number of Aboriginal youth dropping out of school and increase the number graduating from high school.

Work is underway on a cross-government Aboriginal Policy Framework. A key aspect of that initiative will be to work with the federal government to clarify federal and provincial roles and responsibilities. As well, there is a need to identify gaps and overlaps between federal, provincial and community services. Jurisdiction must not be a barrier. All parties must work diligently to ensure optimum services for Aboriginal children. In addition, steps should be taken in partnership with Aboriginal communities to increase the number of Aboriginal youth who complete high school and are able to continue with further studies or move directly into the workforce.

> *"Aboriginal people identified that their political organizations and service agencies must work cooperatively on behalf of their entire community; and, that governments (federal and provincial) need to understand that their role lies in lending support to communities rather than exercising control and authority over services and resources."*
>
> - Children's Forum Report, page 48

14. Focus on education, training and increasing the supply of qualified people to work with children and youth.

14.1. Work with post-secondary institutions to ensure there is an adequate supply of qualified people trained to work with children and youth.

The Task Force consistently heard about high staff turnover, the lack of well-trained people, and the difficulty in finding people to work in communities across the province. This is a problem in children's mental health, in the Student Health Initiative, in Aboriginal communities, and in health, and it is especially a problem in rural communities. The problem needs to be tackled by communities, post-secondary institutions and the provincial government.

14.2. Provide appropriate training and support for volunteers who work with children and families.

Albertans are active volunteers and many programs simply could not be offered without the time and effort of volunteers. At the same time, the needs of children, youth and families can be complex. Volunteers need training in the most effective ways of working with families and children and active support when they are faced with difficult situations.

Getting our act together

The language might sound strong but the message is clear. Government departments, community agencies and schools need to work together so the focus is less on what departments and agencies do and more on meeting the needs of children and youth at risk. This means taking a serious look at how programs and services are delivered today and the barriers that may stand in the way of cooperative and collaborative efforts. The Task Force heard concerns about inconsistencies across government departments, the lack of collaborative efforts, and the need for different approaches to business planning and funding. The Children's Forum Report also highlighted the importance of accelerating steps to integrate services to children and improving departmental collaboration.

At the same time, it is important to acknowledge the major progress that has been made in recent years. The Alberta Children's Initiative, Student Health, Children's Mental Health, the Children's Forum, and a number of other cross-government initiatives are significant steps forward. The work of the Task Force has acted as a catalyst for many departments and agencies to work together on developing the best solutions for Alberta's children at risk. That work must continue.

From a government perspective, it is important to broaden the focus ... not just to look to ministries such as Alberta Children's Services, Learning or Health and Wellness to offer programs and support to children and youth but to examine all policies and decisions with a single question in mind: "What impact will this decision have on children, youth and families?" This approach is consistent with the idea of a "children's filter" outlined in the Children's Forum Report.

Decisions on funding priorities need to take into account the importance of longer term stability for community programs, the reality of growing numbers of young people and children at risk, and the importance of balancing prevention programs with targeted supports for children and youth with immediate problems.

Further work also is needed within government and with various agencies and organizations to identify and remove any legislative barriers that may be in place and have a negative impact on services for children at risk. That includes the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act.

Another key component involves ensuring that there are sufficient numbers of trained professionals with the right skills to work with Alberta's children, youth and families. Today, we face a growing shortage of many key professionals in mental health, counseling and other professions. These issues, combined with the importance of ensuring people have the skills they need to work with children and youth, should be important priorities for the future.

Recommendations

15. Reduce overlap and duplication, improve coordination, and streamline access to programs.

15.1. Complete a review of all agencies providing services to children and youth and receiving government funding.

15.2. Provide coordinated access to information and funding for programs for children and youth at risk.

15.3. Continue to improve the business planning and budgeting process in government to remove barriers and encourage government departments to work together.

The Task Force consistently heard reports of overlaps and duplication in services, the fragmentation of services and funding, and problems in government departments working together.

A review of all agencies providing services to children and youth and receiving government support is an essential first step in assessing what services are available, identifying overlaps and duplication, and also identifying where there are gaps in services available to communities.

Secondly, the process for securing support for community agencies and organizations needs to be streamlined and coordinated. Currently there is no single entity or point of entry for community agencies, organizations or professionals to approach if they are looking for information or support. Frequently, community agencies contact several departments and different grant programs in order to access the support they need. Consideration should be given to a "one window" or "clearinghouse" approach to streamline the process, improve coordination, and reduce duplication.

Thirdly, while steps have been taken to coordinate programs, services and initiatives across government departments, problems remain. The business planning and budget processes need to be reviewed and barriers to cooperative efforts should be removed. At the same time, ministries should be challenged to expand and implement innovative approaches that cut across ministry lines.

Kids fall through the cracks because we are
uncertain of our areas of responsibility."
- Survey respondent

16. Provide more stable and secure funding for community programs.

16.1. Consider providing longer term rather than year to year funding for programs and initiatives that demonstrate success.

Year to year funding decisions cause uncertainty, instability and additional administration work as agencies are required to submit annual requests for funding. Community agencies frequently express frustration over the constant uncertainty that programs may not be continued from one year to the next. Consideration should be given to exploring areas where longer term funding commitments could be made. This would require appropriate accountability and measurements to ensure that programs are meeting the objectives they set. Providing longer term funding could also provide an incentive for agencies and organizations to put appropriate measures in place.

Recommendations for longer term funding also were included in the Children's Forum Report, highlighting the need to provide greater certainty and stability for organizations and agencies that work with children and youth.

"This work takes time and the results take even longer to see. Fund for the long term."

- Survey respondent

"Uncertain short-term funding for some service delivery agencies turns the focus from providing services to children to stabilizing the financial base of the agency. Stable, long-term funding will ensure that children remain the primary focus of the agency."

- Children's Forum Report, page 42

Start Young - Start Now! Report of the Task Force on Children at Risk

Promoting research and measuring results

In the past, numerous programs and services have been developed and implemented but few have been rigorously evaluated to see whether they work, whether they produce the results people expected, and whether they warrant continuing support. In many cases, measures for assessing results are not identified and little information is collected on a systematic basis.

It is critical that we step up research efforts, clearly identify and measure results, and share information about the most effective approaches for tackling particular problems of children, youth and their families.

Recommendations

17. Assess the impact of the Task Force's recommendations.

17.1. Identify measures for each of the recommendations included in the Task Force Report and report regularly on the results.

Appropriate measures for assessing progress in implementing the recommendations outlined in this report should be prepared. We recommend that those measures be developed as a next step in the process and that regular reports on progress be provided to Albertans.

17.2. Initiate research studies on the aftermath of the Taber incident, the impact on the community and the province, and the effectiveness of actions taken to respond.

There are lessons to be learned from the comprehensive and dedicated actions taken in the aftermath of the Taber tragedy. Research studies would help provide an independent review and assessment of the approach taken so that information could be shared widely across the province and across the country.

18. Expand Alberta research on effective programs and approaches.

18.1. Work with community agencies and universities to conduct research on Alberta-based programs and approaches.

It is important not just to support programs and provide funding, but to set deliberate goals, measure results, and assess which programs work and which ones do not. Research should be built in to every project and initiative designed to address the problems of children and youth at risk. This requires a collaborative effort among government ministries, community agencies and universities.

18.2. Develop and disseminate Canadian and Alberta information on successful projects and approaches for children at risk.

Currently, much of the research information comes from projects implemented in the United States. There is a need for comparable information on Canadian and Alberta projects so we are in a better position to apply that knowledge to develop new and better solutions for children at risk.

18.3. Expand the emphasis on qualitative research about issues affecting children and youth and use that information to guide decisions, policies and actions.

The emphasis of many research studies is on collecting quantitative information to measure the impact of certain programs. Current business planning within government and with many organizations tends to rely on short term, quantitative measures. This needs to be balanced with qualitative research that often is a more appropriate way of judging the effectiveness of programs such as early intervention and other social programs.

Ideas to explore

- Establish an Alberta endowment fund to support applied research on effective strategies for promoting healthy development in children and youth and addressing problems of children at risk.

- Establish links with the federally-funded *Centres of Excellence for Children's Health and Well-being*.

In addition to this report, a summary of the various studies, ideas and advice received by the Task Force and the results of a survey of 5000 organizations and individuals across the province are also available.

Appendices

- **Taber Response Summary**
- **Interim Protocol**
  (template for a crisis response plan)
- **Bibliography**

Toward Safe and Caring Communities
Taber Response Project Summary

The Taber Response Project was initiated within days of the fatal shooting at W.R. Myers School, with the Sun Country Child and Family Services Authority designated to take the lead in ensuring the provincial government's commitment was kept. There was no template from which to pattern a response and no way of knowing how far-reaching the Taber tragedy - coupled with other school shootings, most notably, Columbine - could be. A variety of sources were used, including community consultations and research in a multiplicity of areas. Contact was made with other school shooting sites, educators, RCMP, police, counsellors and experts in areas such as crisis response, trauma, risk factors, risk assessment, early intervention, prevention and aftermath. The result was a collaborative, coordinated, community-based approach with a regional perspective. This summary reviews some of the actions, successes and lessons learned, and includes recommendations that may have relevance throughout the province.

Within minutes of the tragic event, the Taber Crisis Response Team was at the site. This inter-agency team, based in the Horizon School Division, is trained in crisis response, operates from a written plan, meets frequently, and provided school orientations long before this event. The Taber Crisis Response Team worked in tandem with Alberta Mental Health, Lethbridge which, in the next 24-48 hours, dispatched some 60 counsellors to district school sites at the invitation of school principals and facilitated several community information meetings. Immediate follow-up to the event was crucial to the prevention of long-term trauma and vital to the healing of those most severely affected in Taber and the surrounding area. The response brought the situation into a kind of equilibrium and allowed for the identification of those in need of further support.

From a regional perspective, Taber is unique in that only one or two other communities have such immediate response capacity and none have a formal, rehearsed protocol. Mental Health, working without a written plan, relied on knowledge and relationships with the public and private counselling network. Although skilled in a variety of settings, not all counsellors had crisis response training. Recommendations that address this immediate response stage are:

- That all school districts have a collaborative, inter-agency crisis response team with written, regularly rehearsed protocols. Parents and other community volunteers can also be part of these teams.

- That each school have a crisis response plan, which includes training and linkages with district crisis response teams.

- That Alberta Mental Health's main response centres have written plans for crisis response, comprehensive lists of all area counsellors and informed personnel to facilitate community information sessions.

- That all potential response personnel, both professional and volunteer, have basic critical incident response training.

Counselling was enhanced immediately within Taber area schools and the community, and continues in this school year. Youth who observed violence, were victims of violence or were threatening violence identified themselves and were offered support. Information on aftermath concerns and the protocol for risk assessment developed in Taber were shared with all school superintendents and principals in the region. Areas of development and training implemented by the project included crisis response, trauma response, risk and threat assessment, youth leadership and peer support. Prevention through the Safe and Caring Schools Initiatives within schools were promoted. The Horizon Caring Schools Committee, comprised of representatives from all schools in the division, was established and met over the summer to plan activities, which ensured a positive start to the school year. Caring Teams were implemented within each school to promote environments in which students could feel secure.

Professional colleagues in the United States have indicated from their observations that when a school shooting occurs (especially when death is involved), there is at least a three-year critical period for symptom development among students and school personnel. Not only can students experience post-trauma symptoms, but there is also a significant increase in verbal threats to duplicate the crime and behavioral threats such as the compiling of "hit lists" and the collection of guns, ammunition and bombs to carry out these threats. These behaviors are seen as normal and expected responses to crises of this magnitude. While most youth uttering threats are not found to be at risk for violence to others, each incident must be taken seriously and assessed appropriately. This area of response has broad implications as student threats continue to surface throughout Canada and the U.S. Recommendations are:

- That all children and adolescents exposed to violence, even if only through graphic media reports, should be watched for signs of emotional distress.

- That safe and caring strategies and programs be supported and always include parents, schools and communities.

- That each school district have a risk assessment protocol for youth uttering serious threats.

- That professional "gatekeepers" have training in risk assessment based on updated (post-school shootings) expertise

- That consideration be given to the victims of threats as well as those making them.

Over the summer, several highly successful short-term, community-driven services were enhanced or facilitated in 10 rural communities to identify children in need of support and to redirect attention from the tragedy and their own traumatic experiences toward positive, constructive outlets. The goal achieved in these communities, often affected by multiple trauma, was to get children and families through the summer safely. Many of these communities did not have basic summer recreation or activities programs for children, which are considered essential in early intervention. The need for preventive and early intervention supports for children and youth as they progress through all transitional stages was indicated in all of our community meetings. There was also a willingness to take community responsibility and initiative to move in this direction

The project tapped into existing inter-agency groups and supported broadening community representation. A steering group in Taber will continue to address its own needs and celebrate successes, following a well-attended community conference. Supporting grassroots steering groups is grounded in the belief that communities are best experts on their needs and that community collaboration is essential. The initial goal of addressing all communities within the Sun Country Region was clearly not feasible, given the project's limited timelines. There was also variance with regard to the degree of collaboration and interest within communities, which was respected. The most successful initiatives were those where community members, regardless of other affiliations, were able to overcome territorial barriers and work together.

Recommendations are:

- That all children have access to universally available recreational opportunities, with priority given to summer programming.

- That initial focus of services and supports be in smaller rural communities with an unusually high incidence of past crisis events.

- That program initiatives be grounded in the value of community involvement and use of service strategies developed jointly with community members and other stakeholders at the local level.

- That government ministries join together with communities to launch a Children and Youth Initiative with long-term funding as a means by which the recommendations of the Premier's Task Force on Children at Risk can be implemented.

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March 16, 2000

Warning Signs
and Interim Protocol
For dealing with high-risk behaviours

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Interim Protocol for Dealing with High-Risk Behaviours

High-risk behaviours

High-risk behaviours include, but are not limited to:

- Possession or use of weapons
- Bomb threat
- Vicious physical assault
- Serious verbal/written threats to kill or injure others
- Internet web site threats to kill or injure others

A program for prevention will be delivered to all students. (Staff and students need to be provided with the same information). Parents will be provided with information regarding high-risk behaviours and this protocol.

In cases where high-risk behaviours are exhibited, the following plan will be put in place. (These behaviours are identified above and would be considered serious, criminal behaviours.)

1. The student will be escorted to a safe, supervised area. When this is not possible, the safety of others (staff and students) will be ensured (refer to individual school protocols).

2. The administrator will contact the police, threat assessment team leader (TATL) and parents.

Imminent Risk

When the student poses imminent risk (i.e., the student has a weapon or is physically acting out in a manner that jeopardizes immediate safety in the school), police will determine, in consultation with the TATL, whether to arrest and charge the student under the Criminal Code/Young Offenders Act or to transport the student to the Threat Assessment Team Physician for evaluation under the Mental Health Act. The Threat Assessment Team Child Welfare Worker will be called if the Child Welfare Act may be utilized to obtain a secure treatment order.

Moderate Risk

If the student has uttered threats, the police and the TATL will determine a course of action. If there does not appear to be imminent risk, the TATL will first do an initial risk assessment. If the student is assessed as high risk, the police will determine appropriate action, as described under Imminent Risk.

If the TATL assesses the student as moderate risk, steps will be put in place to arrange for a more in-depth risk assessment by a psychiatrist. To ensure a safe and caring environment for students and staff (School Act), the administrator, police, TATL and parents will develop a short-term plan, including suspension of the student from school, until an assessment is complete.

Results of the in-depth risk assessment will need to be released by the parents to the school prior to the student returning. Before returning to school, the administrator, police, TATL and parents will need to agree on further interventions, if necessary, that will be formalized in a contract. The contract must be signed by the above named representatives and the student.

Low Risk

If the student is evaluated by the TATL as low risk, the administrator, police, and TATL will discuss if charges will be laid and the school's position/policy regarding high-risk behaviours.

Note: Notwithstanding the result of any risk assessment, the behaviour will be penalized according to school division policy. Where expulsion results, the primary concern will be where we expel the student to and what supports will be put in place for the expelled student.

3. **Victim Assessment**: The TATL will ensure the recipient(s) of the threats/ behaviours is assessed and services are provided as necessary. As the threat may be directed towards one or two students, an entire class, or the school population in general, the circumstances will dictate how far-reaching an intervention must be. Therefore, the TATL and the administrator will determine if crisis counselling or a crisis response team is needed to re-establish calm.

4. **Threat Incident Report (See attached):** The TATL will complete a threat incident report and keep the report on file.

5. **Staff Notification:** All school staff will be notified by the administrator, within a reasonable time period, when the protocol has been activated as a result of high risk student behaviour.

Worrisome Behaviours

When students exhibit early warning signs or when generalized threats are uttered with no specific target (i.e., "I could kill somebody today!"), the administrator can contact the TATL for consultation to determine if the information or incident warrants an activation of the Interim Protocol for Dealing with High-Risk Behaviours. This allows the administrator to consult confidentially on cases without involving intrusive measures.

Identifying Warning Signs of Potential Violence

While there is no foolproof system for identifying potentially dangerous students, who may harm themselves and/or others, this checklist provides a starting point. These characteristics should alert school administrators, teachers and support staff, who will then address the needs of troubled students. Further, such behaviour should also provide an early warning signal that safe school plans and crisis prevention/intervention procedures must be in place to protect all students and staff so that schools remain safe havens for learning.

These signs simply mean that a child appears to be troubled, and violence might be one of the possible outcomes of this distress. Other warning signs may also exist. Consequently, this list should not be considered all-inclusive, and certain items and combinations may be far more indicative of a potential problem than others. Remember, it would be inappropriate, and potentially harmful, to use the early warning signs as a checklist against which to match or label individual children. Rather, the early warning signs are offered only as an aid in identifying and referring children who may need help.

A good rule of thumb is to assume that these early signs, especially when they are presented in combination, indicate a need for further analysis to determine an appropriate intervention.

The warning signs, while not presented in order of significance, include:

- ✔ Has witnessed or been a victim of abuse or neglect in the home
- ✔ Has little or no supervision and support from parents or a caring adult
- ✔ History of discipline problems at school and in the community
- ✔ History of violent and aggressive behaviour
- ✔ Early and persistent antisocial behaviour
- ✔ Has displayed cruelty to animals
- ✔ Low school interest and poor academic performance
- ✔ Has previously been truant, suspended or expelled from school
- ✔ Reflects anger, frustration and the dark side of life in writings and drawings
- ✔ Seems to be preoccupied with TV programs, movies, video games, reading materials or music expressing violent themes or acts
- ✔ Dwells on perceived slights or mistreatment by others and feels picked on or persecuted
- ✔ Has been bullied and/or bullies or intimidates peers and younger children
- ✔ Tends to blame others for difficulties and problems created by self
- ✔ Low impulse control
     - Resorts to name calling, cursing or abusive language
     - Has uncontrolled tantrums and angry outbursts
     - Makes threats when angry
- ✔ Serious threats of violence

- ✔ Intolerance for differences and prejudicial attitudes
- ✔ Excessive feelings of isolation and being alone
- ✔ Excessive feelings of rejection
- ✔ Is involved with a gang or an antisocial group with few or no close friends
- ✔ Background of drug or alcohol dependency
- ✔ Seems depressed or withdrawn and has exhibited severe mood or behavioural swings or has threatened or attempted suicide or acts of self-mutilation
- ✔ Seems preoccupied with weapons and/or explosives or has inappropriate access to, possession and use of firearms
- ✔ Has experienced trauma or loss in their home or in the community

Threat Incident Report

School and school division policy should require students and employees to report all threats or incidents of violent behaviour they observe or are informed about to the Threat Assessment Team Leader (TATL). The TATL should complete a threat incident report as quickly as possible, which includes private interviews with the victim(s) and witness(es). The report will be used by the Threat Assessment Team to assess the safety of the school and to decide upon a plan of action.

It should include:

- ✔ Name of the threat-maker and his/her relationship to the school and to the recipient.
- ✔ Name(s) of the victims or potential victims.
- ✔ When and where the incident occurred.
- ✔ What happened immediately prior to the incident.
- ✔ The specific language of the threat.
- ✔ Physical conduct that would substantiate intent to follow through on the threat.
- ✔ How the threat-maker appeared (physically and emotionally).
- ✔ Names of others who were directly involved and any actions they took.
- ✔ How the incident ended.
- ✔ Names of witnesses.
- ✔ What happened to the threat-maker after the incident.
- ✔ What happened to the other students or employees directly involved after the incident.
- ✔ Names of any administrators, teachers, or staff and how they responded.
- ✔ What event(s) triggered the incident.
- ✔ Any history leading up to the incident.
- ✔ Steps that have been taken to ensure the threat will not be carried out.
- ✔ Suggestions for preventing school violence in the future.

Threat Assessment Team Members

1. **Threat Assessment Team Leader (TATL)** (Recommended Qualifications: Chartered Psychologist; Minimum Qualifications: Master - level Therapist)

Name:_____

Phone:_____ Cell:_____

2. **Threat Assessment Team Administrator**

Name:_____

Phone:_____ Cell:_____

3. **Threat Assessment Team RCMP Representative**

Name:_____

Phone:_____ Cell:_____

4. **Threat Assessment Team Town/City Police Representative**

Name:_____

Phone:_____ Cell:_____

5. **Threat Assessment Team Physician**

Name:_____

Phone:_____ Cell:_____

6. **Threat Assessment Team Child Welfare Worker**

Name:_____

Phone:_____ Cell:_____

7. **Threat Assessment Team Psychiatrist**

Name:_____

Phone:_____ Cell_____

Threat Incident Report

Date of incident: _____

Name of Student: _____

School/class: _____

Nature of threat: _____

Victim's name: _____

Others involved in incident and nature of their involvement (staff, students, others):_____

Names of witnesses: _____

Details of the incident (when and where it occurred, behaviour and specific language of the threat-maker, immediate action taken): _____

_____

_____

_____

Threat Assessment Team intervention and recommendations: _____

_____

_____

_____

Conditions to return to and/or remain in school: _____

_____

Recommendations for others involved in incident: _____

_____

_____

Report completed by: _____

Title: _____

A copy of this report will be retained by the Threat Assessment Team Leader.

A copy should be maintained by the school, as well.

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